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THE GREAT DIVIDE

A Candid Look At Differing Views
Of National Security

NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE
COURSE 5605

CDR H. H. HOWARD III
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Here it is, another Sunday morning, and I just finished reading yet more stories regarding the atrocities in Kosovo. I am watching as the morning talk show pundits continue to vehemently argue the pros and cons of U.S. involvement and greater American combative presence. Most of the debates are well thought out and generally based in fact, if you take the time to read or listen to them. But you've undoubtedly heard the sound bites – the vast majority of Americans can't even find Yugoslavia on a world map! Do you really think John Q. Public is taking the time to read the plethora of stories on the subject? Is the average American tuning in to the talking heads on the late night news shows? Probably not, I must just be strange to be so interested.

So how is it that we have come to be at war with this small country? Why are we now contemplating a massive call-up of the military reserves to take this sovereign nation to task? Good questions, but not the subject of this missive. I ask you to accept the fact that we are there and we will continue to be there until the issue is resolved.¹ Instead I want to concentrate on the underlying issue; the conflicting nature of national security views – those of the public and those of the people responsible for embroiling the United States in situations like the civil war in Yugoslavia.

As the United States presses forward into a dynamic and uncertain era of international relations, one thing appears very clear: like it or not, the USA has become the world's policeman. Yet ironically, fulfilling this global assignment requires greater attention on the domestic front. The gap between the people and the national leadership appears to be widening. Is this a function of arrogant leaders, a broken system or an apathetic public? Lets take a closer look at the problem and analyze some potential solutions that could help the public and the nation's elite get on the same sheet of music.

THE ELEMENTS OF DIVISION

Winston Churchill is thought to have once said, "a democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others." I think Sir Winston was letting on to the simple fact that successful governing on any scale is extremely difficult and that you must readily accept the good with the bad. For example, the truest form of a democracy would have the decisions being made by the leaders a perfect reflection of the majority of the people's will. A lofty ideal; however, we seem to have somehow dropped synch with this premise and, as a country, find ourselves increasingly involved in events which fail to capture the favorable nod of the elusive majority. The following paragraphs suggest some of the factors which may be impacting the different ways in which the leaders and the people of the United States look at world events and national security.

The Nature of Politics. You need not look any further than the underlying essence of what it means to be an elected federal government official to appreciate one of the most significant factors responsible for the difference in elite/public national security views. Whether you believe they do it out of a sense of dedication to the country or simply for the public exposure, the elected officials doing business in the nation's capital place themselves on a pedestal which, from the outset, distances them from public sentiment. Yes, they need the popular vote to achieve the office in the first place (more on that later); yet, once elected, they are immediately imbued with a power unlike any other. With an unstated focus on economic prosperity in their home state or district (read "reelection"), the average Senator or Congressman continually faces challenges on a level reaching well beyond the geographic area that put him or her in Washington in the first place. It is the simple exposure to, and subsequent involvement in, these significant issues that can help fuel a greater sense of self-importance and lead the elected official to value his opinion more than anyone

¹ Of note, the United States has not won a decisive victory in any war of the past 50 years

else's. I am not saying that this phenomenon is wrong, its just that "the people" seem to be left out of decisions regarding issues outside of their local confines. Edmund Burke once said that elected officials had to "do what is right, not what is popular." He must have said that in reference to some contentious, wide-ranging issue of that time beyond the comprehension of the local farm community. My point here is that I don't think the elected officials of today are taking enough time to find out what is popular when it comes to national security issues; they are going it alone.

Elected Official Experience. And just who is it that we have ascending to the aforementioned pedestals of the elected government official? According to the *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*, 217 (or forty per cent) of the 106th Congress are lawyers, 184 are businessmen/bankers, 124 are from local public service backgrounds, 99 are educators and the remaining members come from a wide variety of other occupations. 31% of the total membership of the House once served in the military. In the Senate 43% of the members have had military service. Military service has been declining with each passing Congress. For example, compare the current numbers with ten years ago. In the 101st Congress (1989-1990), 70 Senators (70%) and 216 Members of the House (almost 50%) had served in the military. Perhaps the most astonishing statistic passed on by one lecturer at the National War College is that less than 25% of the latest Congressional freshman class had passports upon arrival in Washington, DC!² The point I want to make is that our elected officials are not necessarily schooled in the realm of foreign policy before coming to Congress. Our system of government forces our national leaders to do on the job training.

Special Ethnic Interest Groups. You don't have to wander far from the shores of the Potomac River to appreciate how diverse the American population has become. My own Washington, DC suburb neighborhood has a

strong mix of Korean, Vietnamese and El Salvador flavor. A recent *Washington Post* poll cited nearly 30% of the people polled as calling themselves some kind of hyphenated American (i.e., Mexican-American, African-American, Asian-American, etc.). While these ethnic groups are proud of the American citizenship they have attained, they nonetheless maintain close interest in their home countries. When properly harnessed these bonds with the homeland can help focus national attention on issues that by themselves would be generally considered of lesser importance to the majority of Americans. Is this good news for the old country or bad news for the USA? Members of the conservative press have denounced the hyphenated American syndrome casting such sentiments as "hyphenating avoids patriotism... dilutes America's greatness .. segregates Americans into clusters .. sounds more palatable to liberals."³ Regardless of where you come down on the hyphenation issue, our elected federal officials are often quick to apply grease to the squeaky wheel – especially when there is a campaign contribution involved (the Jewish and Cuban lobbies come to mind). Are we right to jump in on these issues that don't necessarily make the grade as a "national interest" for most Americans? Or did the previously quoted Edmund Burke have it right when he cautioned "it is a general popular error to suppose the loudest complainers for the public to be the most anxious for its welfare?"

The End of the Cold War. A mere ten years ago we lost our biggest enemy, for many, our military *raison d'être* if you will. Since that time our military might has been dramatically downsized and our worldwide presence similarly reduced. The number of American families with military ties has been thrashed and the economic viability of some cities and towns reoriented as a result of base closings. Needless to say, our involvement in world affairs has not followed the same course. At a time when we should be celebrating our victory

² The school's no-attribution policy prevents me from specifically naming this source

over Ronald Reagan's aptly named "evil empire" we are instead increasingly involved applying our military forces throughout the world. We are in fact doing more with less as result of the underlying "no threat" mentality governing our national security decisions. In the absence of a visible danger to our national security which "fostered a common identity between American people and government,"⁴ we have declared a peace dividend that, in hindsight, we have not been able to pay.

A Prosperous Decade. Life is pretty darn good in the USA! The stock market resides above the 10,000 mark, unemployment is practically non-existent and interest rates are at a low level not seen in decades. Accordingly, our elected officials are quick to take responsibility for this period of prosperity – and they may be justified in doing so - however, the prosperity factor can have side affects. Call it resting on your laurels or simple complacency, but there is a natural tendency to believe that your approach to days gone by will automatically translate into the right answers for all the tough questions tomorrow will bring. More importantly, economic incentives appear to be an increasingly more visible element of our national security strategy. Big business has a voice in the country's security concerns too, but should that be considered a voice representative of Joe Sixpack or yet another of the power elite? (Remember that 184 members of the current congress come from a business/banking background.)

Technology. Imagine for a moment that you are the President and you are faced with an issue that demands a military response. Do you put boots on the ground and risk potential casualties or do you stand off hundreds of miles

³ Doug Daniels, the Liberal Necessity of Hyphenated-Americans, Internet site *Voice of Some Other Americans* 19 April 1999

⁴ Samuel P. Huntington, The Erosion of American National Interests, *FOREIGN AFFAIRS*, Sep/Oct 1997, p 29

from the intended site of the action and lob unmanned cruise missiles at the adversary? Our leaders did not have that luxury in many of the conflicts of past decades. Instead, Americans were called upon to sacrifice their lives in pursuit of national interests. In the battles of today our advanced technology appears to be acting as a sort of shock absorber in instances where our interests are important yet not worth the cost of American lives. Employing the high tech alternative to boots on the ground helps keep the uglier side of war out of Main Street USA by not directly involving the boy next door. While I am in no way advocating the indiscriminant loss of American lives, the unintended consequences of keeping Main Street out of the country's international affairs works against the very foundation of a representative democracy.

The Media. Volumes have been written on the CNN effect and the media's ability to dictate what they perceive to be the most important issues of the day to a world willing to listen. We cherish our freedom of the press in the United States and place great value on our communication channels to areas outside our immediate surroundings. Yet, we are all subject to the biases of those doing the presenting. Hearing both sides of an issue in such a manner as to afford a logical informed decision is increasingly becoming somewhat of a rarity. When national security decisions are in the balance it is vitally important to remember that everyone has an agenda – including the television news organizations and newspaper editors.

Non-Government Organizations. Speaking of agendas, some groups come to the table a bit more focused. Non-government organizations (NGOs) and private volunteer organizations (PVOs) are increasingly showing up in situations once thought to be within the exclusive domain of the federal government. An offshoot of the special interest groups mentioned earlier, NGOs and PVOs can act as a another wedge used to divide the views of the government and the people because they are not bound to official policy views

nor are they compelled to recognize any external command structure. More importantly, these groups offer John Q. Public an alternative to our government's approach – another lifeline to grab at as opposed to helping bail the water out from a leaking boat.

Public Apathy. All of the factors described above (and numerous other minor issues) come to roost in the attitudes of the public in general. Distracted by local events, busy lives and a relatively comfortable posture, more and more Americans simply choose not to get involved in matters as grandiose as national security. Those of us inside the beltway are too close to the issues to look at this subject candidly as our involvement likely stems directly from our occupation. But what about Main Street USA? If it doesn't affect take home pay, Sunday's game or the ability to tip a pint at the local tavern, who cares? Even the impeachment of the President failed to get a rise out of most Americans! Yet, almost as if some historical connection between democratic leaders and people has to be recognized, public opinion polls are being increasingly relied upon as weather vanes for directing action on foreign policy issues. I submit that while some method of measuring public sentiment is vital, opinion polls are certainly not an exact science.

In summary, multitudes of conditions appear to be responsible for the division in foreign policy views which exist today between Americans and their leaders. Perhaps the best evidence of this growing dilemma is born out in the newfound concern for a United States' homeland defense. While short of an all out isolationist strategy, the very nature of homeland defense implies that either we have no significant national security interests abroad or that our national security actions are, in themselves, too provocative for our own good.

PUTTING THE PIECES BACK TOGETHER AGAIN

I maintain that the United States has a deeply rooted responsibility to remain extensively involved in world affairs. However, the manner in which we approach these duties needs to be better understood and supported by all Americans both within and outside of national leadership circles. The following paragraphs provide my suggestions for making the country's national security actions more reflective of the will of the people.

Remove "Security". According to Samuel Huntington, "subnational commercial interests and nonnational ethnic interests have come to dominate foreign policy."⁵ I certainly agree - national security appears to be tied much more closely to economic concerns and a desire for regional stability. Accordingly, the threats against us should not be viewed through traditional "security" lenses. Is there any country out there that can really stage a serious attack against the U.S. homeland? It is time that we evolve our foreign policy to reflect our true national interest of prosperity for Americans. My vision calls for us to eliminate the word "security" from discussions of "national security strategy" and commensurately focus on more proactive and less defensive issues associated with the country's revised and more positive "national strategy." Again, I maintain that we must remain involved throughout the world; however, our efforts should be clarified along the lines of what we are really all about.

A Home for Strategy. Under a reoriented national strategy the National Security Council is renamed the National Strategic Council and would be exclusively responsible for crafting the nation's strategy. In an effort to bridge the gap between the Congress and the Executive branch concerning foreign

affairs, the strategy would be closely developed with input from both sources and be ultimately set forth in a business plan type format for Congressional and Presidential approval similar to a law. The idea is to centralize the United States' voice which is heard around the world. Of note, the military role currently associated with the National Security Council is not abandoned and the application of military force would not necessarily be constrained beyond today's levels. However, a less paranoid national strategy will likely result in reduced U.S. military involvement overseas.

More Help. A recent lecturer at the National War College perfunctorily remarked on the volume of vital and immediate decisions required of the President's National Security Advisor and the improbable expectations of completing them all in an adequate fashion. The NSC, as currently manned, appears unable to execute the duties assigned. My proposed changes for national strategy would not, if at all, change this assessment. The burdens of this institution demand increased staffing. We should not be stingy when it comes to manning the organization responsible for the future direction of the country. Along the same lines, staffing at the State Department should also be increased with special emphasis on providing more Foreign Service officers.

Government Service. Much has been written on the cross-section of men and women comprising today's all volunteer military force - the sons and daughters of the more affluent members of society are not usually found carrying rifles or flying fighter jets these days. Along with an overall smaller military, the elimination of selective service has, in the words of James Webb, (resulted in a situation in which) "almost no one in a position to affect policy has a direct human stake in the outcome of a military engagement."⁶ Taking this a step further, the lack of universal government service for all Americans can also

⁵ Ibid p 28

be considered a factor in the apathetic approach to national security concerns. Mandatory government service, of some type, would help reestablish a wider interest in America's direction or at least cause more people to have a stake in what is going on outside of their personal cocoon.

Conclusion. I don't have a solution to address all of the elements of division mentioned earlier; some should just be considered necessary evils or simply the outcome of days gone by. Congressmen will probably always be better politicians than foreign policy experts and the business of the Media will always be principally business. On the other hand, the voices of ethnic groups and NGOs should be considered positive attributes, essential to the fabric of a democratic United States.

The United States has never been in such an enviable position. Unmatched by any military or business competitor, we possess the power and respect to affect world events everywhere. Yet, despite this current achievement of success we will not begin to approach lasting greatness until we fill the great divide which exists within our own system of foreign policy.

While I maintain the system is somewhat broken, the true failure at hand resides with the American people. As such, the democratic ideals of our forefathers can only be reestablished through greater participation of the people in the decisions affecting America's future. Public support for the radical change in national security strategy I am advocating must be carefully hammered out, but done in such a manner as to accommodate and accentuate the will of the people.

⁶ James H Webb, Jr , Military Leadership in a Changing Society, *Naval War College Conference on Ethics*, November 16, 1998